High Noon for Women's Clubs

Faced with new competition, they must adapt—or disappear

When Clarice Conley was nine years old, her mother and grandmother began the initiation. Dressed in her finest, shoes shiny, gloves pristine, she was allowed to follow them through the heavy oak doors of the Highland Park Ebell Club in the hills of northeastern Los Angeles. In the cavernous main hall, surrounded by distinguished ladies with brows aloft, she listened to dramatic readings, or speeches on art or tropical Brazil. The children even had a dining room all their own.

More than a half-century later, Conley is president of the club. But the hub of cultural and social activity that flourished in 1922 has only 40 members left. It leases space to help pay expenses. Conley, who at 74 is one of the younger members, realizes that an era has passed. "It's not that the women have changed," she says. "There's still a need for contact with people. It's the life-style that's changed."



DAVID STRICK—ONYX

Endangered species: Conley, front and center, with fellow members

Without modern missions, traditional bastions are losing their appeal.

Conley's club is not alone. Across the U.S., the traditional women's club has become an endangered species, with a steadily aging membership. The number of club members has dropped by more than half since 1957, to fewer than half a million. Now that more jobs, organizations and opportunities are open to women of all ages, the clubs seem to be less attractive; many are faced with either making major changes or closing down. "We're in steady decline," admits Leigh Wintz, executive director of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, "and it's a difficult process to reverse."

The search for a fresh vision is most evident in the Junior League, that onetime bastion of society ladies that has gradually emerged as a powerful force for social change. At its annual meeting three weeks ago in Chicago, some 900 delegates voted to standardize admissions procedures, pulling down, in effect, some of the blood-test barriers that for years preserved the league as a high Wasp domain. The vote, said incoming President Maridel Moulton, "will signal to the world that we really are an organization that wishes to be open to any woman who wants to make a commitment to volunteerism."

In recent years leagues in many cities have spent less time on cotillions and cookbooks and more energy on women's alcoholism, battered wives' shelters, rape-crisis centers and teen pregnancy. Many have also worked to make the growing membership more representative, but old pedigrees die hard. "We've stood on our heads to make people aware that Junior League is not a society organization," says Maria Trozzi, of Boston's Junior League, which has dropped virtually all barriers to admission, "but that image is hard to change."

Hard to change, in part, because the image of women's clubs is so tightly tied to the bone-china days of yore. Most clubs were born in the era following the Civil War as a makeshift laboratory for women's consciousness. The Industrial Revolution had freed women's time, reduced their chores, increased their mobility and introduced that cherished female institution, the free afternoon.

Yet from the beginning, there were clubwomen with a more ambitious agenda—to reform not only themselves but society. Over the years they provided the leadership for the suffragist movement, child-labor reform, conservation, temperance and civil rights. "You have to remember," says Karen Blair, assistant professor of history at Central Washington University, "that until 1920 women didn't have the vote, and this was their only way to have a public voice outside the home."

In one sense the clubs have become victims of their own success: by realizing their mission, they invite their demise. As access has opened up to government, the workplace and the courts, women's clubs are no longer the primary path to fulfillment or power. Where they once provided an invaluable network of contacts and company, they must now compete with single-issue organizations, professional groups and even men's clubs.

Many young professionals have launched their own charitable groups. As women master the most advanced fund-raising techniques, they lose their patience with the labor-intensive traditions of club charity work. "Women's philanthropy is becoming much more sophisticated," says Los Angeles Businesswoman Patty DeDominic. "Why have twelve committee meetings to raise $4,000 when, with the right contacts and planning, you can have one event at someone's home and raise $25,000?"

Those women's clubs that have taken on more challenging projects seem to find members more willing to devote their time and energy to the cause. Other organizations will have to adapt their programs, schedules and rules in order to survive. "I think we're waking up and deciding something needs to be done," says Carol Silvus, president of the Texas Federation of Women's Clubs. Some groups are holding more events at night and on weekends and trying to broaden their membership base. The Virginia federation has established an organization for deaf women, while New Jersey has formed a group for the mentally retarded. All are working hard to attract younger members. Ironically, many hard-pressed clubs may find that a return to the activist spirit of the past holds the greatest promise for the future.



DAN FORD CONNOLLY—PICTURE GROUP

Reaching out: Junior Leaguer on a hospital visit

—By Nancy R. Gibbs.

Reported by Elaine Lafferty/Los Angeles, with other bureaus

Discontents of the White Tribe

Eric Fischl disturbingly paints the hidden life of suburbia

Eric Fischl has become the painter laureate of American anxiety in the '80s. From the moment he exhibited *Sleepwalker,* 1979, his image of a teenage boy resentfully masturbating in a suburban wading pool, Fischl has zeroed in with unblinking curiosity on the discontents of the White Tribe whose territory stretches from Scarsdale to Anaheim: unreachable kids, grotesque parents, small convulsions of voyeurism and barely concealed incestuous longing.

This is the suburb as failed Eden, noted by two out of three American sociologists and not a few novelists. But Fischl's project is not to embroider clichés on it. Rather he finds images that seem to trail a whole narrative history behind them, but obliquely—so that you, as viewer, are put at the threshold of a hidden life that may, if you look closer, be yours. Fischl is a true American realist, but he works at a pitch of psychological truth (especially about adolescent sexuality) not known in the American narrative art of his forebears in the '30s. At his best he seems, roughly, a cross between Edward Hopper and the Philip Roth of *Portnoy's Complaint.* Thus it seems just right that Roth has written a catalog introduction to Fischl's current show in Manhattan, six paintings on view at the Mary Boone Gallery through June 25.

When Fischl started out, the odds were against the very idea of narrative painting based on the human figure. Born in New York City in 1948, he went to the California Institute for the Arts in Valencia in 1970, just at the height of the belief, then endemic in the American art world, that "painting is dead." Cal Arts epitomized the frivolity of late-modernist art instruction—no drawing, just do your own thing and let Teacher get on with his. Art education that has repealed its own standards can destroy a tradition by not teaching its skills, and that, broadly speaking, was what happened to figure-painting in America between 1960 and 1980. Fischl is not a mature artist yet, but he deserves nothing but respect for his struggle to create a mode of figuration that is tense, dramatic and full of body. He has managed to reconstruct at least some of his birthright; his figures, though they inhabit a wildly different sexual and psychic world from that of late–19th century America, have a direct matter-of-factness that reminds one of Winslow Homer. But the signs of loss do show.

Clearly, Fischl wants an overall look that is not too finished, consistently "imperfect," with an air of unconcern for its own pictorial mechanism—the creamy, dashed-off realism of a Manet oil sketch. But this requires a mastery over the detail and frequency of brushstrokes, and a certainty about the drawing embedded in them, that he has not yet attained. He will slide from a passage of near virtuoso colloquialism to one of awkward smearing and prodding, and not fix—maybe not *see*—the difference.

He also tends to work as though he were afraid a single surface could not be "radical" enough. Hence his use of canvases butted against one another, overlaid, leaning together, with the scene continued across them. This "collage" sometimes carries a memory of constructivism, and suggests the overlay and dissolve of film images. But it is still a pedantic device. In *The Young Max B. in Kansas,* 1987, where an altar boy in a white surplice is standing behind a kitsch ornament on a lawn in front of a tract house, the ornament on its separate canvas looks like an afterthought, even though its blue sphere, coarsely suggestive of infinity, is essential to the image. Fischl's work is far stronger when it speaks directly from a single, continuous, rectangular plane, so that the argument between illusion and brushstroke and dramatic scenario is not cluttered by artsy, shaped-canvas garnish.

The most ambitious painting in the show, *The Evacuation of Saigon,* 1987, is only half an allegory. Its title invites you to see the naked girl at the end of the jetty as an abandoned South Viet Nam and the rubber boat as leftover military hardware, but the invitation is not very strong, since her chunky white body is so obviously Western. The work is more a genre painting of some unclassified weekend incident.

The strangest image, and the simplest, is *Girl with Doll,* 1987. Wiry, squinting and indefinably prole in her nakedness, she recalls one of Homer's Maine girls deprived of innocence and brought up to date. But the Bullwinkle doll she holds is like some witch's comic-repulsive familiar in Goya; it has her by the neck, and the pairing is so vivid that for the moment you ignore the formal lapses in Fischl's painting, such as the overstressed modeling of the knobbly knees. The canvas provokes comparisons with monster-and-innocent pairings in older art, and then slyly retracts them: *Hey, lighten up; it's just a kid on a beach!* This harsh painting exemplifies Fischl's desire to turn the viewer into a reluctant and embarrassed witness. At such moments you realize that, whatever awkwardness his work still harbors, you cannot wait to see what he is up to.

—**By Robert Hughes**



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***The Evacuation of Saigon,* 1987: half an ambitious allegory**